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The Clipper Visits Alan Behunin

BY NANCY McCAFFERTY



Ray Alan Behunin took some calculated risks in his life and came out ahead. What appears on the surface as diverse experiences merge to form a solid background complimentary to his work today.

Born in Farrin, Utah in 1935, Alan lived in Salt Lake City until 10 years ago. His father was a tree surgeon who, with Alan and his brothers, are the only people commissioned to prune trees on Temple Square, site of the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City.

Of great importance and truly a dominant influence in his life is his religion. He was brought up a Mormon and at age 19 took part in the 2 year missionary program the church offers its young members. Missionary posts function in nearly every part of the world except the communist bloc countries, China, and several African nations so there exists the possibility of foreign travel. The parents or the young people pay all expenses and consider it a gift of service to the church.

Alan had completed 2 years at the University of Utah majoring in speech and journalism and was working with his father to raise money for his forthcoming missionary trip when he learned he was

chose the Marine Corps and arrived at boot camp to find himself under the command of a drill sergeant who was later court martialed for "abuse of the troops." "Talk about a culture shock!" Behunin says. "I had just come back from preaching, trying to reach the best in people, doing all the spiritual uplifting things missionaries are supposed to do. Then this! The sergeant was like Darth Vader -- he had such command of the dark side of the English language." After 6 months active duty in San Diego, he was given an honorable discharge because doctors discovered a compression fracture to one of the vertebra in his back.

The Behunins were married in 1959. Alan re-entered the University of Utah, found work as a freight dispatcher to pay the bills, and finished his studies in 2 years.

He took a job as news editor for the Murray Eagle in Salt Lake City. The paper's circulation was 22,000 and was printed on an old 8-page flat bed press. Alan involved himself in many aspects of the business. He trained and hired stringers, took pictures, sold advertising and designed lay-outs, wrote editorials and features -- everything except collect the dime on the street corner. The State Press Association thrice awarded him "bests" for story of the year, editorial of the year, and photo of the year. Alan found the variety and demanding work schedule stimulating. "I was news editor who couldn't spell. You can imagine the problems I had!" he joked.

Behunin changed jobs to work at a radio station in the public relations and advertising department. In 1966, he ran for the State House of Representatives on the Republican ticket and won election for a term. "My campaign costs totaled \$60. I literally ran for the office. Each Saturday I met with a different district chairman and we'd run down the streets, the chairman on one side and myself on the other, and knock on doors. I wore out 3 pairs of shoes." He thinks that for our system of government to be successful, people must get involved. "You want someone whose primary concern isn't re-election. It's so easy to lose sight of the fact that you're there to serve. If people would take the responsibility of an active roll there would be fewer professional politicians and far more respect for elected officials. There's too little of the concept of stewardship."

A "real challenge" came when he was offered the management of the Utah Civic Ballet. "I had never seen a ballet before!" His task was to keep the company financially afloat, set up schedules, tours, promotions, and handle the practical aspects which keep the dancers on their toes. There were many innovations. He changed the name of the company to Ballet West and sent it on tour throughout Utah and the large cities of Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. "Sometimes ballet was a tough sell to small

performed many times, obtained grants from the Ford Foundation and the government, and provided the dancers with year-round work instead of the usual 8-months. "Normally dancers work 8 months and are out of a pay check the remaining 4. Some who don't watch their money go on welfare. It's bad for them as well as the state and I tried to alleviate that."

With clutural events available to the newcomers, Alan helped fill the need with Ballet West. The University of Utah agreed to award credits toward a Masters in fine arts to their students who toured with the dance troupe. "When I became the manager, it was already a fine little company We conceived new approaches and took it to where it is today." Last year Ballet West performed in the old City Center in New York and got excellent reviews. Behunin remembers a performance of Swan Lake in a theatre where the backdrop was the beautiful mountains behind the building. In the third act when Odette dies, lightning and thunder rolled across the mountains as if on cue. Alan contacted a stage hand on a portable walkie-talkie and asked if he could keep it going. The state hand wasn't sure he had that much infulence with the director who was making it happen.

Behunin transterred to the Pennsylvania Ballet Co. which had a contemporary repertoire as opposed to the classical one of Ballet West. He thought that the cast's talent wasn't appreciated and ran into opposition when he tried to control expenses. "it wasn't as satisfying as my work with Ballet West and the situation became untenable."

He left to become public relations director at the Herculon Co. in Wilmington, Del., where he remained for 5 years. "We made useful products from things that used to go up the smoke stacks. A German scientist developed a molecule condensing process which converted worthless material into itmes like plastic. It was interesting work."

Today Alan is director of communications at the Wm. Underwood Co. "Deviled ham, not typewriters," he laughed. He and Joan have 4 children, Melanie, Linda, Michael, and David. He is proud of his family and says that raising children in this day and age doesn't scare him too much. He regards his kaleidoscopic background as fine training and the vessel which carried him to his goal of public relations work. This son of the tree surgeon planted the seeds of curiosity and diligence and they blossomed into a colorful orchard.

going to Brazil. Today, condensed, and highly concentrated foreign language classes are taught at Brigham Young University so that young Mormons will be able to speak the language of the country to which they are sent, but in Alan's time, there was no such advantage. He said goodbye to his future wife, Joan, promised to write, and in 1955 headed south.

Behunin said he found the Brazilians a warm, exciting, loving people who move at a much slower pace than the U.S. "They are friendly, personable, and the no rush attitude results in an ability to enjoy life." The missionaries worked in pairs and he was assigned an English-speaking partner for 6 months. Alan spoke almost no Portuguese, the native tongue of Brazil. "One day I rolled out of bed, said 'good morning,' and received an answer in fluent Portuguese. It was then I realized that I had a new partner, a native Brazilian. He spoke no English. I spoke no Portuguese. I thought I'd better learn the language in a hurry."

He moved from place to place, spending 4 to 6 months in each area. The mission headquarters were in Sao Paulo where he worked on 3 different occasions but he also visited Jucze de Fora, the German settlement of Joineville, Porto Uniao, and Uniao da Vatoria. The humid penetrating heat of South America was an unrelenting presence. The missionaries were expected to dress appropriately which at that time meant coats and ties. Behunin recalls it was not unusual to have to change clothes 3 times a day. He remembered one prayer meeting where he saw the sweat cascade from his face to an already saturated shirt and tie and drip from the tie to a puddle on the floor. The recent heat wave in Duxbury must have seemed like an Arctic breeze.

Alan regards his mission in Brazil as a wonderful experience. "It makes you grow and see beyond your own culture. Things are not simply black and white; there is a vast area of gray between and sometimes Americans don't recognize that."

In April of 1958, Alan came home. On Mother's Day (May 11th) he and Joan became engaged. "How many other guys remember the date they were engaged?" he laughed. "I wrote letters and sent her goodies while I was in Brazil just to let her know I was still around."

The draft was still in effect in 1958. The Korean War had ended 5 years earlier, Cuba was one short year away from Castro, and 4 years ago McCarthyism had plummeted. The Cold War was simmering with itchy trigger fingers and Khrushchev's Communism was a blend of threats and frightening crudeness. Behunin had a religious deferment while away but once home, his draft board notified him that his number came up. He

towns of cowboys and ranchers so we'd arrange lecture-demonstration programs in key communities. The kids who came were really enchanted with it, and they'd get their parents to bring them to the performances. We organized the Aspen Ballet Festival which is still running and participated in the Zion Valley Ballet Festival, to mention only a few. (Alan's great-great-great-grandfather named the mountainous area Zion and his homestead was where the lodge stands now.) It was marvelous to see the growth of the thing," said Alan. He increased the number of ballets to 30, each